



The Smartest Test Takers I Know

AN INSIDER'S TAKE ON TEST PREPARATION

by Bruce Reed



Behavioral Truths of Confident College Applicants

Strong scores are not the only way to spot the smartest test takers among us. Every year such students stand out in a few key ways. Cultivating these traits early will help families understand how their behavior and attitude can produce the most optimal testing outcomes in the long run.

Thirst for strategic guidance on testing is greater than ever. So this primer aims to help you understand the college admission testing landscape, individualize your plan, and chart a course from a posture of confidence. The students destined for the most satisfying test results will place preparedness, thoughtfulness, and accountability at the center of the process. They'll plan well, remain sensible and resilient, and be driven primarily by their own goals.

The healthiest approach to test preparation avoids the extremes. That means you'll neither underestimate nor overestimate the importance of testing in the college admission process. It means remaining grounded and sensible about it, unaffected by the hype and uninfluenced by the emotions of others. Rather than let fear or dejection set the tone, you'll matter-of-factly accept testing as a relevant, but not all-consuming or defining, component of your high school record. Use testing to serve your needs rather than dash your dreams.

Smart test takers will map out a plan early and make small course corrections along the way. While keeping long-term attainable goals in mind, know that test preparation is hard work that involves some frustration and disappointment in the short run. View a sub-par score on a practice test as nothing more than useful feedback. Resist the urge to check testing off your list as soon as possible. Be patient; keep testing integrated into the overall process of getting ready for college. Afford yourself time to grow into your scoring potential.



Good Test Prep Starts with Good Planning

Great planners calendar well, and they start by counting backwards from the fall of senior year. Poor planners, in contrast, tend to disregard real-world timelines and merely think in terms of “taking” tests — isolated events aimlessly scattered across school years. Savvy students, meanwhile, work backwards from test dates so that proper preparation and decision timelines can take shape. They first frame their full testing window and then sketch in what they already know, or reasonably expect, will occupy their lives during that period.

While standardized tests are not pleasant, they are predictable. Early exposure and subsequent practice breeds familiarity. Gradually, as experience grows, you will develop not only a better grasp of the test’s content but also valuable test-taking skills like pacing, endurance, time management, and decision making.

A common game plan looks like this:

- ▶ Take a PreACT in October of 10th grade as a no-stakes introduction to testing
- ▶ Take a practice PSAT by the end of 10th grade for comparison purposes
- ▶ Consider some foundational test preparation over the summer if needed
- ▶ Take the PSAT in October of 11th grade, especially if you plan to take the SAT

(This is also the National Merit qualifying test for juniors)

- ▶ Choose the SAT or ACT and select a date for your first official sitting

(Most students take their first test in spring of 11th grade)

- ▶ Allow up to a few months to prepare for your selected test
- ▶ Consider taking Subject Tests in May or June of 11th grade
- ▶ Re-take the SAT or ACT at least once to improve in one or more sections

(over the summer or early in the fall of 12th grade)



I generally disfavor taking an official college admission test during (or before) the first semester of junior year unless you are clearly ready to go. If you're tempted to test this early, do so off the record. Full length practice SATs and ACTs are readily available, and opportunities to experience them in a simulated, proctored environment are frequently offered. They are free, and results are kept private.

Better yet, practice tests are actionable. Unlike officially administered tests, practice tests are truly diagnostic in that students receive scores with little delay, and they can review the items they missed. The PSAT is also a good diagnostic tool for reviewing questions, but the two-month lag in receiving scores is a costly period of time for juniors targeting the March SAT.

I recommend waiting until you feel well prepared before you take your first official SAT or ACT. Stakes will be higher and confidence levels should be too. Additional schooling, maturation, a sensible amount of preparation at the right times along the way, and a sustained attitude of resilience will all work in your favor.

By the spring of your junior year, you and your college counselor will review your cumulative GPA, your first set of official test scores, and your preliminary list of potential colleges. It'll be time to reconcile these factors and decide what is needed to align your goals and scores. You may determine that you are done with testing. Or you may opt to gear up for one final sitting. For the SAT, that could be in August or October; for the ACT, it could be in July, September or October. Note that while some early decision/early action deadlines still accommodate the October SAT and ACT dates, unexpected scoring delays can create headaches. It's therefore safest to reserve November and December dates for regular decision applications.





Four Steps Forward

Step 1: Research Testing Requirements and Policies of Colleges

As you explore specific colleges, familiarize yourself with the range of testing-related policies that vary by college and that will impact your testing strategy. Every college will accept the SAT and ACT interchangeably (although some don't require either). But that's about the only consistency you'll encounter as you delve further. The variable issues include:

Subject Tests

Though only a few colleges still require Subject Tests in addition to the SAT or ACT, dozens more recommend or consider Subject Tests. Some accept the ACT in lieu of the SAT/Subject Test combination, and some others will even accept Subject Tests in lieu of the SAT or ACT. If Subject Test colleges are in play for you, you should allocate a spring test date to complete those. May and/or June are sensible options because year-long coursework will be nearly completed, and preparation for AP and/or final exams will begin. Subject Tests are offered only on dates that conflict with the SAT, so calendaring is an important exercise to begin now.

SAT Essay / ACT Writing

Fewer than 20% of colleges still require the so-called “optional” essay that comes at the end of both the SAT and ACT. However, that list includes notables like the UCs, University of Michigan, Claremont McKenna, and some (but not all) Ivy League schools. A third group of big and small colleges – like Colby, Occidental, Chapman, Baylor, Rutgers, and University of Washington – “recommend” that you opt-in to the essay. While not required, it's expected.

The essay policy is one of many test-related issues that varies by college. Schools with similar testing policies are not necessarily otherwise similar, leaving students unsure how to proceed. I urge you to complete the essay; it will have no impact at colleges that don't consider it, but failing to complete the essay may disqualify the entire test sitting at colleges that do require it. Even colleges that superscore – combining section scores from multiple test dates – probably won't consider any part of a test result that does not include the essay.

Score Choice and Superscoring

College Board and ACT have “Score Choice” policies that give students some control over how scores are reported, but colleges have the final word on what should be submitted and how those submitted scores get sent and used.



It would be great to know the score-reporting policy of every college you're considering, but your list may not be formed yet. If you assume you'll send all scores to all schools, you will more carefully consider the timing, frequency, and level of readiness for your official sittings. Although colleges can't access your scores until you provide them, you'll be expected to follow each college's testing policies.

Colleges routinely see two to three sets of scores of a given test from an individual applicant, so it's smart to re-test, within reason. Colleges that ask for all scores do so in part for the benefit of all applicants. A complete set of scores allows colleges to see what they want to see across a broader data set. Some admission offices, for example, will create superscores by combining your highest section scores from multiple sittings. They don't want you to inadvertently exclude a high section score.

Test Optional

Going test optional is a decision best made at the application stage rather than during the testing process. Your SAT, ACT, and Subject Test scores may or may not put you in a favorable light, but you won't know that until after you have completed your testing. Despite the significant number of colleges that have gone test optional, you should not limit your choices before the application process begins.

Average Test Scores for Target Colleges

You may have a fully-formed list of colleges, or you may still be a year away from formulating a plan. In any case, knowing the typical scores of enrolled students can give you a better sense of what needs to be accomplished and how you might refine your target colleges. You likely have time to improve your scores. Sophomores, in particular, are still building important academic and test-related skills.

Step 2: Map Your Full Testing Plan

With a contextual understanding of requirements and policies, you can begin to tailor an individualized testing plan that suits your schedule and serves your needs. Grab your calendar and familiarize yourself with the upcoming slate of official test dates.

Count the number of weeks (and conflicts) you have leading up to different test dates. Test date selection should be based on academic readiness, test preference, desired preparation timelines, date conflicts, and application deadlines. There's no such thing as predictably "easier" or "harder" test dates, and whoever else is testing on a given day has no bearing on your score.



To recap, it's wise to complete at least one SAT and/or ACT before the end of junior year and to remain open to re-testing in the summer or early fall of senior year. The temptation to get testing out of the way early is understandable but unwise. Peak results often occur late as the combined forces of maturity, experience, and refresher prep provide a difference-making lift. Roughly two-thirds of college applicants take their final admission test in the fall of senior year.

In addition to an SAT and/or ACT in the spring, juniors should consider Subject Tests while the material is fresh. Students taking an AP, Honors, or advanced course in a given subject are especially good candidates for a corresponding Subject Test.

Although no college asks you to take both the SAT and ACT (or credits you for doing so), many students end up taking both. I recommend focusing on one test, or at least one test at a time. A comparative analysis of the PSAT and a practice ACT might yield a preference or it could be more of a judgement call. Preparing for one test will pay dividends on the other if you decide to cover both bases in the future. This has become even truer with the recent changes to the SAT.

Step 3: Create Testing Accounts

After mapping a comprehensive testing plan, don't neglect the critical mechanics. If you took the PSAT, you've probably set up a College Board account, which allows you to register for the SAT and Subject Tests, access those results, and eventually submit those scores to colleges. A separate ACT account is required to manage your ACT testing.

Most colleges want official score reports sent via the testing agencies. However, some colleges now allow applicants to initially self-report scores and then provide official reports only after being admitted and prior to enrollment.

Registering early increases your chance of securing a seat at your first-choice venue. Tests are not offered at every high school, so you may need to travel to another school in your region. Opt-in for the essay during registration and take note of what's required (and forbidden) on test day. If you require special testing accommodations, be sure to have those approvals in place. The testing organizations have crucial differences in their accommodation policies.



Step 4: Determine a Test Preparation and Practice Plan

Busy students may need up to a few months to prepare for the SAT or ACT. Proper test preparation will clean up content gaps identified by diagnostic tests. It will also give insight into subtle test traits and your blind spots. You will develop control of the test, the clock, and your own testing habits. You'll grow to anticipate what's coming next and maintain a rhythm and efficiency that allows you to focus on accuracy while finishing every section on time.

Good test preparation involves a commitment to evaluated practice over a reasonable amount of time, exposure to authentic study material, and some dry runs on full-length exams. Both ACT and College Board offer free or low-cost access to practice material and there is an established commercial test prep industry that delivers resources and instruction.

Test prep comes in different forms. Self-starters can successfully self-study by committing to persistent use of options found online and in bookstores. Other students benefit from the structure and discipline of a regularly scheduled group class. Still others feel that the individualized approach of one-on-one tutoring works best for them and their busy schedules.

Smart Shopping for Test Prep

As you explore commercial alternatives, it's good to be armed with questions to help you determine the best fit. Start by asking yourself a few questions about what matters most to you. Then ask friends and counselors for trusted recommendations. Finally, think of what to ask a prospective test prep provider. If you're satisfied with the way these questions are answered, you'll feel better about your decision. A few suggested questions to get you started:

- *Does the firm specialize in test prep or is test prep on a long list of its college related offerings?*
- *Is testing their true area of expertise? Do they publish ongoing research and resources demonstrating their expertise?*
- *Is the firm equipped to handle all of your test prep needs (SAT, ACT, Subject Tests) with subject-matter experts? Do they have strong curricula and sufficient study materials*
- *What is their history with college admission testing and preparation? Who provides leadership?*



- *Is their test prep recommendation placed within the context of your needs and goals? Did they take the time to ask thoughtful questions and listen to you?*
- *Who are the instructors? How are the instructors hired, trained, supervised, supported, evaluated, and professionally developed?*
- *How does the student-instructor match process work to ensure a good fit?*
- *Who is ultimately accountable for a satisfying experience and outcome? Who is in charge of resolving issues along the way?*
- *What exactly will test preparation involve on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis?*
- *How are goals determined, pursued, and measured? What happens if goals are not reached?*
- *What are the contractual terms of the program? Are the terms client-friendly? Are they student-centric? Are they easy to understand?*
- *What are the firm's expectations for the student? For the parents?*





Further Questions

This primer is meant to provide a robust introduction to the college admission testing process but it is far from exhaustive. It may generate as many questions as it answers.

The company I co-founded in 2004, Compass Education Group, is committed to elevating the collective level of knowledge surrounding this topic. In addition to providing one-on-one tutoring in-home and online, Compass is a resource of timely testing-related information and guidance for families and counselors.

You are encouraged to explore our website where we expand on the topics introduced here. You may also schedule a personal consultation with one of our directors to discuss your needs in greater depth.

800-620-6250 | norcal@compassprep.com

COMPASS
EDUCATION GROUP



compassprep.com